

Purim Message from Rabbi Jordan Braunig, Emory Jewish Chaplain

February 25, 2021

If I look backwards a full year, it is the zany, drunken, masquerade holiday of Purim that marks the last moment in Jewish time I can recall before the world was really turned on its head by COVID. On a remarkably warm March day last year, we passed out treats to passersby on campus. Silliness and merriment were present, but so too was a feeling that something big was coming. An announcement would come from the university. Perhaps, students speculated, spring break would be extended an extra week (maybe, two!). We celebrated our holiday of randomness and luck, even as we wondered what strange turns the days ahead would hold.

We had no idea.

The night before, at our synagogue, we had bumped elbows with friends. There was hand sanitizer near the hamentashen and one clever congregant had even dressed up as a bottle of Purell. We sat spread out (synagogue-goers were ahead of the curve in terms of social distancing) and listened to the story of Esther chanted. We laughed and hollered and made noise to celebrate a holy story in which the Holy One is conspicuously absent. The story of Purim asserts that when the Divine is hidden, it is upon us to manifest holiness in our world. We felt this truth in our synagogue that night. We did not know that this would be our last time with community in this sacred space.

In the early months of quarantine, as we adjusted to the new realities of working and schooling from home, I would occasionally head back to my office to grab a book. Walking into the Hillel building, I was confronted by a world frozen in time. There were graggers on the table and our chalkboard read "Happy Purim." The building had been Pompeii'd by COVID and was stuck in a perpetual Purim. The upsidedown-ness of the holiday seemed to have taken hold in the world, the joy...not so much. I considered erasing the board, but felt like there was something I was meant to ascertain from its message.

The story of Purim is one that centers on the precariousness of our existence. What might otherwise be anxiety-provoking, on this day causes us to laugh, to poke fun, to pour another drink and to toast our surprising survival. In a year of such intense calamity and grief, I am not sure how to properly celebrate. We are certainly not the first to encounter the dissonance of revelry in difficult times, but a bacchanalian vibe seems hard to achieve over Zoom. I look back on our celebration last year and it is easy to shake my head at the extent of what we did not know. We are taught that we can drink on Purim "*ad d'lo yada*/until we can't distinguish" up from down, right from wrong, hero from villain. We perform this not knowing, but in our hearts we believe that we are aware, clear-headed, cognizant of the world and its manifold dangers. This year, it doesn't feel like an act; we have settled into

unpredictability. We really don't know what forces (spiritual, political, viral) are looming, ready to upend our sense of normalcy. Tonight we will make a l'chaim to all of the uncertainty, the unsteadiness, the lack of control. May we look back in a year, grateful that turning the world on its head feels fun again.